

Iran's Nuclear Program: Energy or Weapons?

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to

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Introduction

Iran presents a threat to the Middle East region and the security of the United States, according to the 2006 staff report of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence under the U.S. House of Representatives. This is due to Iran's past and current activities involving threatening statements made by President Ahmadinejad, covert advances in its nuclear program, support of various terrorist organizations, and resistance to international negotiations concerning these activities.¹ Iran has deliberately concealed its uranium enrichment program disregarding its agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. Iran also possesses additional capabilities that threaten regional and international security that include its offensive chemical weapons research and development, biological weapons program, and the fact that it has the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the Middle East. This last capability, coupled with the others, presents a serious threat to the region. In addition, Iran's continuing support of terrorist organizations including the ongoing insurgency in Iraq with "funding, training, and weapons" is not reflective of the actions of a peaceful nation. On the subject of nuclear weapons, "Iran's willingness to endure international condemnation, isolation, and economical disruptions in order to

carry out nuclear activities covertly, indicates Iran is developing nuclear weapons."²

Thesis Statement

Claims by Iran that its current nuclear program is aimed at providing an additional energy resource to be used for peaceful purposes is not supported by their actions.

History

Iran has acted in violation of IAEA agreements and has attempted to conceal their nuclear weapons research and development. This alone is cause for suspicion concerning the intent of their nuclear program.³ The IAEA encourages nations to pursue nuclear programs that can support and enhance the quality of life of its citizens. The IAEA "seeks to promote peaceful use of nuclear energy and to inhibit its use for military purposes".⁴ The IAEA also assists these nations in developing their nuclear programs, given certain guidelines within the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) are agreed upon. Iran's attempts to engage in activities outside of these guidelines, while concealing their efforts and risking additional international sanctions, does not make sense. What would make sense is that Iran would take this risk if their intentions are not to develop a nuclear program solely for peaceful purposes.⁵

Over 20 years ago, Iran began to pursue the capability to produce weapons grade nuclear material. In this time they have developed numerous facilities to support and develop this capability. Beginning in 2002, the IAEA issued a series of reports that explain how Iran has been covertly conducting nuclear research outside the guidelines of the NPT, as well as Iran's refusal to fully cooperate in disclosing these activities. Iran has routinely attempted to mislead IAEA inspectors with false reports while conducting activities and experiments without notifying the IAEA. Due to this lack of cooperation, a resolution was passed in 2005 that highlighted Iran's failure to comply with the obligations agreed upon by the IAEA statute. This resolution stated an "absence of confidence that Iran's nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes", and required Iran to suspend uranium enrichment and reprocessing.⁶ Iran disregarded this request and announced it would continue with uranium enrichment activities. This forced the IAEA Board of Governors to report their concerns about Iran to the United Nations Security Council. In June of 2006, Iran was offered an incentive package supported by the US, Russia, UK, France, and China to suspend uranium enrichment and begin negotiations concerning their nuclear program. Iran ignored the offer and as a result the UN Security Council passed a resolution in July of 2006, which gave Iran until August to

suspend their nuclear program. Iran once again refused to suspend its uranium enrichment program, which has led to the current international trade sanctions placed upon them.⁷

Alternate Energy Resource/Counterargument

If Iran is seeking an alternative energy resource for peaceful purposes, as it claims, then there are numerous other ways that this could be achieved. Other methods of energy production are available for this purpose that would not create such a conflict with the international community. Although they have chosen this route which has led to increased trade sanctions being placed on Iran, creating additional economical hardships within the country. Iran possesses significant oil reserves and has the 2nd largest natural gas resource in the world which, according to Kenneth M. Pollack of the House Armed Services Committee, is a more cost-effective means of producing electrical energy.⁸ What Iran lacks is enough indigenous uranium resources to sustain fuel for a single power-generating reactor. The uranium that would be mined indigenously could be used to produce several nuclear weapons.⁹ The ability to mine uranium indigenously gives Iran's nuclear weapons program the ability to be self-sustaining and resistant to international interference.¹⁰

In February 2004, Iran admitted to obtaining designs and key components to enrich uranium through centrifuge technology. This came after Dr. A. Q. Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear

weapons program, confessed to providing Iran with this technology.¹¹ "Centrifuges are essential equipment for uranium enrichment, the multi-stage industrial process in which natural uranium is converted into special material capable of sustaining a nuclear chain reaction."¹² If Iran's intent is to develop their nuclear capability in order to generate electrical energy for civilian use, then they would not need this technology. The enrichment of uranium is not required to generate electricity by a nuclear reactor but is essential to a nuclear weapons program.¹³

In addition to Iran's activities to acquire the necessary technology and material to produce nuclear weapons, President Ahmadinejad's public statements do not convey the message of a nation with peaceful intentions. The following remarks were made in 2005 by President Ahmadinejad at the Iranian Interior Ministry: "The annihilation of the Zionist Regime will come... Israel must be wiped of the map... and God willing, with the force of God behind it, we shall soon experience a world without the United States and Zionism."¹⁴ In 2006 President Ahmadinejad made a nationally televised announcement stating, "I officially announce that Iran has joined countries with nuclear technology." It remains to be seen how far Iran has progressed with its nuclear program and whether this capability includes nuclear weapons.

Iran often cites that under Article IV of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that they have an inalienable right to develop a nuclear program. What they do not seem to understand is the Treaty's initial clause "that all States in good standing have the inalienable right to acquire peaceful nuclear energy". By violating the agreements in this Treaty through false reporting or simply not reporting their activities and acquiring materials and technology for nuclear weapons, Iran has not remained "in good standing" and has lost that right. The UN Security Council has made it clear that until Iran fully discloses its actions in violation of the NPT and allows IAEA inspectors full access to their facilities, they have forfeited that right.¹⁵

Iran continues to respond to all interested parties that it has a right to develop nuclear energy and that it is not conducting covert research and development of nuclear weapons. Iran insists that in order to meet the needs of its growing population and industrial developments, it must pursue the additional resource of nuclear energy. Iran does not feel that the international community has a right to deny them access to this technology. They do not agree with the argument that due to Iran's vast oil and natural gas resources, nuclear energy is not necessary to sustain the energy requirements of the country. When they could develop a nuclear capability to lower this

requirement allowing for other natural resources to be maximized for export.¹⁶ Iran views the actions of the U.S. as trying to prevent its development and influence in the Middle East Region. "Thus, Iranian leaders ask themselves, under such conditions, what should any independent, sovereign nation prudently do to ensure its own survival".¹⁷ Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Iranian Hostage Crisis that followed, the U.S. has promoted a containment strategy restricting Iran's access to new technology and other resources required to develop and sustain the country. This seems to have forced Iran into a situation where it had to become more self-reliant and resourceful in continuing its nuclear program. It is this that has been the cause of so much suspicion as to what they are trying to achieve, given the unknowns of their progress. Iran's former President and Islamic Cleric gave a statement in 2004 concerning their position on nuclear energy:

Allah willing we expect to soon join the club of countries that have a nuclear industry, with all its branches, except the military one, in which we are not interested. We want to get what we are entitled to. I say unequivocally that for no price will we be willing to relinquish our legal and international right. I also say unequivocally to those who make false claims: Iran is not pursuing nuclear weapons, but it will not give up its right. Your provocation will not make us pursue nuclear weapons. We hope that you come to your senses soon and do not get the world involved in disputes and crisis's.¹⁸

The following year, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, issued a fatwa on the subject of nuclear weapons: "the production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons are forbidden under Islam and that Iran shall never acquire these weapons."¹⁹

Conclusion

Much debate continues as to whether or not Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons capability concurrent with its known nuclear program. Iran's nuclear program dates back to 1967 when Iran's first light water research reactor at Tehran Nuclear Research Center became operational. It has been assessed that from the 1980s up to 2003 Iran pursued a nuclear weapons capability.²⁰ Given the time and effort spent in this endeavor, it seems unlikely that this program would be abandoned. Although, the current U.S. Intelligence Estimate, as of November 2007, concludes "with a high level of confidence that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003 and that the program remains frozen".²¹ However, freezing the program allows for the option to resume the program. Given the increased instability within the Middle East Region since 2001 to the present, Iran's nuclear program has become and will continue to be the focus of much debate. The overriding questions remain, is Iran attempting to achieve a nuclear weapons capability? If so, how long until this is realized? And ultimately, what are their intentions?

(word-count 1744)

Endnotes

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